

Career Brief #3: *The Challenge of Change*

Our world is changing faster today than it ever has before. Changes no longer occur as periods of instability followed by more stable times. The changes we face today are continual and increasing, and sometimes appear to be coming at us from all directions. The analogy some of the experts in the field are making is that it is like white water rafting. We know something is going to be waiting for us right around the next bend. We just don't know what it will be. And it is the fear of the unknown that troubles people most when facing change.

Author William Bridges tells us that, "It isn't the changes that do you in, it's the transitions." In his book entitled *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*, Bridges refers to change as being external and situational. It is the new boss, the new policy or the new work schedule. Transition, however, is internal. It is the psychological process people go through in order to adapt to the change. This is an important distinction, since we know we often cannot control the external situations in our lives. But we can control how we react to and cope with those situations. Bridges provides some helpful advice on this topic.

While the starting point for change is something new, transition begins with an **ending** – a leaving behind of the old reality. This is true whether the change is positive or negative. Consider, for example, the last time you began a new job. There were probably many good aspects to the change. Perhaps your salary increased, the position allowed you to better use your talents, or maybe the worksite was closer to your home. However, in order to begin this new change, you had to let go of many things – co-workers you liked, a feeling of competence in your prior position, the old routine that had become familiar. These are losses and endings. Transition always begins with letting go of something. This is important for each of us as individuals to realize. It is also important for organizations to consider when in transition. According to Bridges, "Nothing so undermines organizational change as the failure to think through who will have to let go of what when change occurs."

The second stage in transition is what occurs after the letting go – **the neutral zone**. It is the place between the known past and the as yet unknown future. In the example above, it is the time after you have successfully let go of the old position, but are not feeling completely competent in the new one. Bridges calls this neutral zone the "no-man's-land." He says this is both a dangerous and an opportune place and is the very core of the transition process. We see this duality in the Ancient Chinese symbol for change. The top element represents danger and the bottom represents opportunity.



One of the dangers of this stage is that if you do not understand what is happening and that it is a natural part of the process, you may feel that your discomfort is a sign there is something wrong with you. Another danger is that you may be so frightened by this stage that you run away. Third, if you do escape prematurely from the neutral zone you will miss out on the opportunity for creativity, renewal, and development that comes out of this transition stage.

The final transition stage is the ***new beginning***. Ending – neutral zone – new beginning. People need to complete the ending and spend some time in the discomfort of the neutral zone before they can possibly move on to a successful new beginning. The problem is that most people and most organizations try to start with the beginning rather than paying needed attention to endings. They also fail to acknowledge the existence and importance of the neutral zone. No wonder, Bridges argues, we have so much difficulty with change.

Here are some recommendations for working through each of the transition stages:

ENDINGS

- Identify who is losing what
- Acknowledge the losses openly and sympathetically
- Expect and accept the signs of grieving
- Give people information, and do it again and again
- Define what is over and what is not
- Mark the endings and treat the past with respect
- Don't drag it out. Plan it carefully, and let there be time for healing. But once it is done, it is done.

NEUTRAL ZONE

- Redefine it – change the metaphor people are using to describe this uncomfortable time
- Create temporary systems for the Neutral Zone
- Strengthen intra-group connections to provide support networks for staff
- Use a Transition Mentoring Team, a group of 7 to 12 people who represent a cross section of the organization and whose purpose is to facilitate upward communication, correct misinformation and counter rumors
- Use the Neutral Zone creatively to encourage innovation and new thinking about the way business is conducted

NEW BEGINNINGS

- Create a compelling case for change
- Maximize involvement at all levels
- Provide relevant education and training
- Establish regular, meaningful communication
- Embrace change as a challenge – an opportunity to create a better future

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